

# The Semiotic Significance of a Chinese Space

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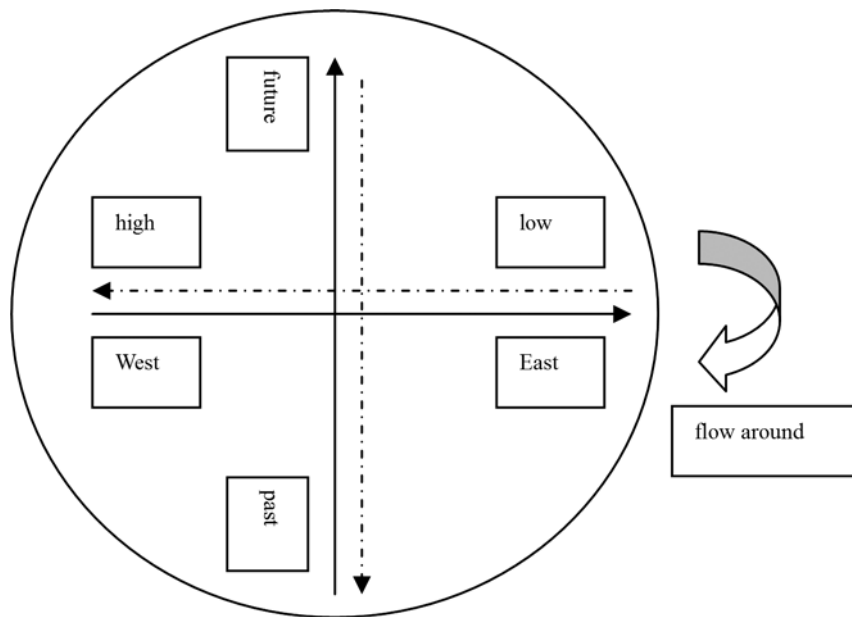
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## **Abstract**

Human world is a world of sign. The western semiotic system corresponds to the Weltbild of the western world. Its basic methodological principle is not only significant as a theory of universal methodology of the human science, but also a simulacra of the Lebenswelt, the unconscious part of the huge consciousness building, and the interior structure of the superficial structure. The form is the real content. Based on this idea, the imagination, design and construction of a real China-space, which on the contrary has a kind of methodological, technical significance as well, imply not only a semiotic system about China, but even a Chinese Semiology. In fact, as far as the design of China-space is concerned, some scholars' mode of imagination has been subtly, but radically different from that of the most other western philosophers and sinologists. One common key characteristic of their construction ways is the application of Book of Changes (Yi Jing), the old Chinese book of wisdom. Can this provide the professional Semiotics with any inspiration? Can this contribute to our reconstruction of faith and community feeling after the flux of postmodernization which aims at deconstructing the fixed world picture represented by the orthodox Semiotics?

To imagine a China, we have many ways. In J. J. M. de Groot's sinological work *Universismus*, China manifests itself as a strictly ordered construct, each part has its specific size and fixed location. It's a typical scientific discourse. Meanwhile, in the postmodern discursive field, China often appears to be a metonym for the pure chaos, such as Fredric Jameson's "Number Three" or Michel Foucault's "Chinese Encyclopedia", etc. China's fragmentality and indecipherability is reflected in some disjointed images representing a "schizophrenic" aesthetic.

But Richard Wilhelm's China is distinguished from all others. Richard Wilhelm, a German sinologist, so far the most prominent western translator of *Yi Jing*, has a singular work about the modern Chinese historical and cultural changes since the end of Qing dynasty. In this book named *Die Seele Chinas* (1925), he attempted to arrange in a typical Chinese way every historical and cultural events he has experienced during his twenty-year stay in China, in order to show European readers some of the unchangeable, deep things of the Chinese culture in its profound changes. Its communicative model seems to be the following schema:



What does this mean in semiotic terms?

1) Circularity of past and future. In the traditional Chinese conception, the past or the future is not an absolute matter (in semiotic terms, the past and the future are only different ways of code arrangement). It has impact on Wilhelm. In the western perception, China usually represents an eternal "past", but he wants to present in the "past" a tendency towards the future. Westerners believe that China is a thousand-year mummy, lifeless, isolated from any progress. But he shows us, China has been always experiencing dramatic changes. So many new cultural values have been produced since the Zhou Dynasty. In recent period, much more revolutionary figures emerge in the field of culture. Kang Youwei is a heresy equal to Marx

and Lenin. His radical treatise *Investigation on the Reform of Confucius* transformed Confucius into a Jesus-like revolutionary, but also caused a trend of skepticism about history. His *Book of Great Harmony*, which is so radical that the author dared not publish it in his life time, even proposed to abolish the family — the core of Chinese tradition.

At the same time, the text faces the past. A search for the traditional fountain runs through Wilhelm's contemporary cultural narrative. To give the new experience a suitable background and foundation, the contemporary must create its traditional source. Chapter VII, "Trip to Confucius temple and wedding of Confucius' descendant" is a highly allegoric travel account. The author and his Chinese students took a trip to the mausoleum of Confucius in Qufu in order to reveal the source of China's vitality. He found that the real, durable value of Confucius is not exterior, but only a basic schema to shape the culture and human itself. In contrast, all other acts to maintain a tradition are artificial and temporary. For example, the pompous wedding of Confucius' descendant hasn't brought a desired offspring, symbolizing the superficial bustles of some conservative persons who fruitlessly endeavored to found a church for Confucius.

2) Intercommunication of West and East. Modern Protestant missionaries used to have a superficial arrogant attitude, as if all of the Gospel and meaning emanate — in a one-way flow — from the western source into the East. But Wilhelm cherishes the achievement of Jesuits in China. Jesuits in Ming and Qing dynasties can learn the essence of Confucianism with an open mind and overcome the misunderstanding of both sides. Chapter "Qingdao's old men" embodies the ideal of this interaction. When the 1911 Revolution broke out, a large number of Qing officials and scholars fled to seek refuge in the German colony of Qingdao. Qingdao, as a bridgehead of European culture, becomes now a focus of Chinese old culture. An equal exchange of two cultures shows through details of everyday life. A dialogue in the banquet becomes a miniature for the communication of China and West, because the guests accidentally discovered that the ultimate attitudes towards the universe were actually quite similar in the West and East: the old Jews treated sunset as the beginning of a day, just consistent with *Yi Jing's* conception: the climax of dark power means also the start of its abatement.

3) Harmonious co-existence and co-operation of different levels. Since *Dao* as the ultimate principle runs latently in every thing, a real history should be the manifestation of the all-round performance of *Dao*. Therefore, Wilhelm creates a semiotic space that contains various levels of Chinese culture, ranging from the formal cultural achievements, political conflicts of upper class, folk rituals and festivals, all the way to the dark corners of thieves and underworld gangs. In semiotic terms, the same basic sign of Chinese Spirit gets a different expression respectively, under every different circumstance. Wilhelm believes that even in the bottom society of beggars, thieves and robbers, you can find an order which legitimates these humble means of living. The real mob appears only in the chaotic transitional phase.

4) This diachronical and synchronical circumfluence which penetrates into every level is the order of *Yi* (Changes) and the cosmic framework. The principle of *Yi* works everywhere and aggregates the scattered cultural codes — from ordinary people's souls to the cosmic order reflected in the solar terms — into an organic entirety. The first chapter is a gateway to

the soul. The author observes coolies in German colony Qingdao as living human being. This daily contact is the first step towards the soul. To enter a cosmic process, we must first recognize the independence and autonomy of insignificant people around and enter a lively spiritual exchange with them. The final chapter is a description of the Chinese temporal conception and solar terms. Only festivals, as an order of time, can adjust the endless changes in time stream. This order is the natural rhythm itself. Narrative moves in a yin-yang rhythm: China's ostensible degeneration is the rise of real Chinese spirit, the Boxer movement as the bottom point of national destiny is also a new starting point where Xenophobia achieves its climax only to make place for the sincere will to understand others. In the same way, alongside the narrative of the cultural prosperity goes the description of the dark world of thieves. Circularity is a universal law.

This cosmic framework compasses local movements in every direction and then ensures that such contradicting poles as East and West, traditional and modern, revolutionary and conservative, upper and lower, present and latent, communicate and commutate among themselves, and all levels of life operate in their own way. This framework is lacked in semiotics. Semiotics has a rather unsafe boarder. Although it is satisfied with its pure formal significance as a universal methodological instrument for other sciences, but no single methodology can insulate itself from social ideologies outside and thus it is always in danger to be assimilated by them. However, Wilhelm discovers a triple meaning in the single Chinese word *Yi* (Changes):

- 1) *Yi* as simple change in a cause-and-effect relationship;
- 2) *Yi* as change of circulation (cycle of four seasons, for example);
- 3) *Yi* as non-change which incorporates the ultimate order of the universe.

The cosmic order of non-change, as the general background and framework, constitutes the premise of all forms of changes. Viewed from the semiotic perspective, this is a set of principles to organize sign activities and semantic flows. Just in this way, the Chinese space which incorporates the wisdom of *Yi* unites two different orders of the Chinese cultural codes, the sinological discourse and the free heterotopia-imagination of the postmodernist, or language and speech.

Thus, the concept "Chinese space" becomes clear gradually:

1) it is a new horizon that subject acquires when it tries to escape from all established knowledge systems and transcend itself into an "Outside". The association of the Chinese space with an outside horizon is very natural in the pragmatics of western languages. In English, we call a labyrinth structure "Chinese box", an unsolvable problem "Chinese puzzle";

2) we talk about this transcendence from the western standpoint, especially with the help of Richard Wilhelm's narrative as a springboard. It is thereby an outside space in a post-western sense;

3) The Chinese space is a spatialized metaphor of the Chinese idea.

It should give inspiration to semiotics, which also cares about the arrangement of cultural codes (Lotman's cultural semiotics, for example). What the Chinese space imitates is the

original, authentic universe as the primal sign system, not a artificial, abstract language world of a linguistics. Its cosmic character is prominently embodied in the dimension of “return” or *Fu* in Chinese. *Fu* means coming back, renewal, renovation, rejuvenation, recovery, regeneration, etc. As a unique category of Chinese thought, it strongly expresses the circularity of the life which neglects nothing in its power to vitalize the world. As *Yi Jing* describes, “There is no plain without a slope, there is no going forth without a return”. (*Tai*, Line 3). “Turning around and returning to the way. On the seventh day return comes” is just the course of heaven (*Fu*). Semiotics of the structuralist type invites the waves of deconstruction just because it lacks this dimension of return.

Henceforth, the assimilation of the life dimension of a Chinese space into semiotics means a combination of language logic and life logic. It is of great importance in many aspects from epistemology to political pragmatics. In this way, semiotics will resist the challenge of poststructuralist thought, re-conduct the confusion of the postmodern into an order. In our age of media and financial capital, the semiotic features of social reality becomes increasingly clear, as if the radical demystification of the modern returns to a myth system. In the postmodern hyper-space, the modern man has rediscovered its actual position. He is a helpless subject, lost in the jungle of symbols and images. In this case, the need for an effective general semiotics is extremely urgent. However, the traditional semiotics, as a typical scientific discourse, only deals with the things of the second order in the sense of Jean Baudrillard, which includes such categories as objectivity, “scientific” ethics of the knowledge, the truth principle, etc. Once involved into the practice, it enters a world of third-order simulacra where every move obeys a model of uncertainty. This contradiction explains why the semiotics falls into disfavor in the poststructuralist era: it cannot handle the unpredictable contingency.

But the postmodern cannot accommodate the chaotic diffusion. On the contrary, its most eager desire is to be accommodated because in its refusal of history, depth and reference, it gives up any ground within itself. Following a one-way semiotic course, regardless of how far the postmodern has advanced, it can only prove in a self-destructive way that no matter the temporal categories of the modern (its opposite) or the spatial categories of the postmodern (itself), everything is a fiction. This has led to the need for a new framework which survives the death of time and space. Even if time and space lose their locating capability, history is already at an end. Even the western cultural body itself has been submerged (this cultural organism is the matrix of all postmodern “end”-discourses. But under the daily erosion of the globalization waves, this particular model of generating cultural values may also become invalid). This framework continues to exist and play the role of a supporting and accommodating ground. It is namely the life framework in the principle of *Yi*, symbolized by the Chinese space. The inherent state of exhaustion and world-weariness hidden in the contemporary postmodern theory reveals its inborn weakness, because a consequence without premise is illogical, a belief without ground is rather doubtful, in other words, the postmodern nihilism of the game for the game is theoretically a pure speculation, and catastrophic for the social ethical practice. To illustrate this point, the sociologist Jean Baudrillard is a good example. In his postmodern space, the consequence of the Derridarean sign play became all too clear. The whole post-industrial society, in his eyes, is a system of simulacra without any hope for a salvation. Simulacra are namely dead signs which are devoid of any corresponding signifier. They can only in the implosion

restlessly vary their operating programs, but incapable of a life gestation. The solitary possibility of breaking through this ubiquitous system hegemony appears to be represented by the death impulse of the terrorists. Such terrorist acts as the September 11 attacks are qualified to this “sublimating” function, simply because it reflects a double blindness: first, its success is based on the grasp of the complicated technology, namely, on the simulation of the blindness of the instrumental rationality (the machine’s mission is to maintain the operation of system in a blind reproduction); Second, it assimilates a sort of extreme belief, that is, it simulates the blindness of the life (what makes a blind life superior to the blind technology is that it can destroy itself). How bleak a scene of the world is! But Baudrillardian judgment of the absolute closedness of the system is actually a begging gesture to ask for a meaning. In fact, if this were a perfectly closed system, from which omniscient position Baudrillard, who is also confined within it, knows its closedness? If we survey the actual location of Baudrillard in the world, we can obtain a useful implication for the semiotic discipline because his situation may also be the same as the general situation of the semiologists, the believers of the language logic.

Actually, we can re-integrate Baudrillard into a life space (the true spirit of the semiotic study, according to my understanding, is to allow the first system smoothly merge into the second system and the entire signifying system becomes a part of this second system, just as shown in the transition from linguistics to semiotics). The organizing principle of this space is not a formal logic of the language, but rather the logic of life. It is the original language and the ultimate motivation, while the instrumental language logic, in terms of its aimlessness, just constitutes the section of unconscious speech. Compared to the life, it’s rather irrational. It is obvious that Baudrillardian capsulated systems precisely belong to the speech section in this extensive sense. However, we can’t study the speech separately, excluding the language beforehand. We actually handle the speech from the perspective of language system which here means the grand universe system. That’s why Roland Barthes believes that a linguistics of speech could not be possible for Saussure. The closed system of simulacra doesn’t exist. The world contingency embodied by the terrorist attack is not meaningless, but a more grand reference system which is needed to accommodate the mechanic systematic existence and the Nothingness of death. Just for this need we intend to build a Chinese space, following the example of *Yi Jing*, whose task is to handle contingencies and give them a proper position in the universe.

The Chinese space based on the wisdom of *Yi* accommodates all local structures in any form, direction and dimension, but would not solidify into a substantialized super-structure, then it is a *Wu* (not-one) in the ancient Chinese idea. This not-one is apparently different from the western monosemized concept of “Nothingness”. It doesn’t mean a nullity, but the highest richness, just like the self-contained universe, for which no addition is needed. In this sense, it is an organic sign containing interchange of being and non-being within itself. If so, then the Chinese space is no more than a new magic word. But why bother adding an exotic word to the philosophical repertoire which is already too full? On what grounds shall we recommend people to try this new concept-product when seeking to understand our world and our existential problems? Generally speaking, the most valuable thing is its insistence on the relationship between the cognitive subject (along with its study of signs) and the large-scale system of the universe, and its appeal for a revision of the one-way thinking model. These two points, which

are of great relevance in terms of ethics, epistemology or ideology, will inevitably become the cornerstone of the faith in the future human community. Meanwhile, the Chinese space itself has a very specific technical value. Each semiotic system is trying to imitate the world's myriad changes. The manner of *The Book of Changes* is the most easy and simple one. "What is easy is easy to know; What is simple is easy to follow", otherwise, the semiotic system itself will become a trap for the human thought. At the same time, the Chinese space embodies the natural need for a disciplinal extension since semiotics, as a study of sign activities, ultimately cannot avoid the task of reading the universe as the greatest sign.